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A Field Experiment on the Effects of Ethnicity
and Socioeconomic Status on the Quality of
Representation

In modern representative democracies, the principle of equality provides a fundamental normative underpinning for political institutions. All citizens are considered to have an equal right to contribute to shaping the public goods that result from policy processes, and all citizens can expect to benefit equally from the outputs of the political system, with public services administered impartially. This is how equal representation is understood. Yet a number of studies, particularly in the US context, have shown a disparity in responsiveness to certain groups or sectors of society (Grose, 2014). For example, in a series of studies Butler (2014) finds that US politicians are more likely to respond to co-ethnic constituents, building on earlier work with similar findings (Butler and Broockman, 2011; Broockman, 2013). Building on these and other studies, we argue that legislator responsiveness to constituents' personal concerns will not fully adhere to the democratic norm of impartiality, but will instead be sensitive to two factors, one strategic and the other psychological. Strategic considerations suggest that representatives should be more responsive to constituents whom they perceive to be politically active, as well as to constituents on whom the provision of service may have a persuasive effect vis-à-vis mobilization and even vote choice (Mayhew, 1974; Searing, 1994). Psychological theory indicates that politicians may exhibit ingroup bias in that they may be more likely to respond to those citizens with whom they share demographic characteristics. We go beyond previous work in several important ways. First, we disentangle the impact of ethnicity and socio-economic status on legislator responsiveness. By focusing on a context where class and ethnicity are both highly salient political cleavages, we are easily able to signal both characteristics and to ascertain their impact separately and interactively. Second, we provide a more thorough assessment of the quality of legislator responsiveness than has been carried out in previous studies by examining overall responsiveness together with the temporal dynamics of responsiveness (through an event history framework), as well as the helpfulness of responses. We look at to whom Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom respond, how fast they respond, and how helpful are their responses. Third, we focus on a parliamentary system. Given that most democracies

are of the parliamentary type, research in this context is especially needed to understand the broader dynamics of democratic representation. We do, however, examine a system where the electoral institution resembles that of the United States, and thus where legislators have a greater incentive to cultivate a personal vote than in other parliamentary systems and where responsiveness to constituent needs is well-established and firmly grounded in the culture of the legislature.

We adopt a field experiment approach, using emails to contact MPs in the UK for help with a problem, but varying randomly the occupation and putative ethnicity of the emailer. The strategic hypothesis is by the emailer’s occupation, either a professional position of an accountant or a working class position of a “builder” (construction worker). Despite a degree of class dealignment over the past several decades, the UK party system remains strongly class-based, making the occupation of the constituent a relevant marker of electoral behavior. Ingroup bias can be examined both through the occupation of the constituent—where members of Parliament may feel a stronger affinity to those in more professional careers—and by the ostensible ethnicity of the emailer. Our findings point to a high rate of responsiveness and a high level of helpfulness, much greater than previous studies have shown. But we also find evidence of inequalities in politicians’ provisions of constituent service, particularly in differences in the efficiency of responsiveness based on the occupation and the ethnicity of the emailer. Our theoretical and empirical contribution overall speaks to broad and important concerns about representation in democratic systems.

Responsiveness in Modern Democracies

Recent rises in levels of economic inequality in many democracies have prompted concerns that the benefits of representation may be skewed toward certain sectors of society. We focus on the service provided by elected representatives to individual constituents who contact them, as have a number of recent studies in the US (Broockman, 2013; Butler, 2014; Butler

and Broockman, 2011; White et al., 2015) and to a lesser extent, comparatively (Vaccari, 2014; Distelhorst and Hou, 2014; Meng et al., 2017). Helping citizens deal with problems and issues that arise is an important form of representation that elected officials deliver, offering a useful means of gauging whether the democratic political process is effective in treating all citizens equally. Moreover, focusing on the efficiency and quality of the provision of that service is important. Constituents oftentimes raise concerns that are timely in nature, and if politicians and their staff wait too long before intervening, any assistance offered will be less effectual.

The job of a representative elected to a legislative assembly is a complex and time-intensive one, including responsibilities of care to the constituents who elected them. There is a long tradition—particularly in polities with single-member district electoral systems—of representatives taking on casework stemming from issues or personal matters voiced by those in their districts (Fenno, 1978; Cain et al., 1984, 1987; Searing, 1994; Norton and Wood, 1993). Such service affords elected officials advantages beyond fulfilling a duty; providing casework can be advantageous electorally as well (Cain et al., 1987). Helping citizens deal with problems can foster goodwill and contribute to a reputation for competence. For citizens of the same party, such service could contribute to strengthening party ties and increasing the likelihood of voter mobilization; for those of the opposing party, such service could even have a persuasive effect. Indeed some have focused on the provision of service to explain the perennial finding from public opinion surveys that Americans have high levels of favorability toward their respective member of Congress, and comparatively low approval for Congress as an institution (Parker and Davidson, 1979), which has also been shown to be the case in the United Kingdom (Allen and Birch, 2015). Given the possibility of an electoral reward, one would expect that constituent service should be provided to all citizens, and that we would not witness a bias in responsiveness, or significant heterogeneity in the efficiency of responsiveness or in the level of help offered.

Yet recent studies have demonstrated significant bias in responsiveness to concerns raised

by constituents, based particularly on the demographic or partisan characteristics of the petitioner. A number have employed a field experimental design, which provides superior leverage in assessing causality. One such approach, and the one we adopt here, is to contact legislators using the same grievance or concern, and varying the putative race or ethnicity of the person soliciting help. For example, in an early study in this vein, Butler and Broockman (2011) requested help from members of Congress with emails sent from either “Jake Mueller” or “DeShawn Jackson,” where the former is an ostensibly White citizen, and the latter, an African-American constituent. They then observed varying rates of responsiveness among politicians, with Jake Mueller receiving disproportionately more replies. They attribute the differential treatment to discrimination.¹ Such bias has been demonstrated in state legislatures as well (see, for example, Butler, 2014). White et al. (2015) shows that electoral officials are less likely to reply to email enquiries from those with Latino names than non-Latino ones, and Einstein and Glick (2017) similarly finds discrimination toward Hispanics among local bureaucrats, particularly in the tone (“friendliness”) of the email response. Although comparative applications have been notably fewer, Distelhorst and Hou (2014) and Meng et al. (2017) demonstrate that officials in China respond differentially to members of the public based on ethnic backgrounds. Vaccari (2014) finds, in a study aptly titled “You’ve Got No Mail” that across a number of political systems, the majority of emails to politicians go unreturned. There are important caveats to most of these studies: first, that despite the proliferation of parliamentary systems in the world, few studies have turned attention to them. Second, most studies have operationalized responsiveness in binary terms by recoding whether or not the legislator in question replied to a constituent query. Yet the efficiency and helpfulness of response are also of theoretical and substantive interest. Many constituents contact their representatives as a last resort, and often their concerns are by that point quite urgent. In our analysis, we thus assess both the overall response rate by petitioner, the timeliness of reply, and its helpfulness.

¹The authors distinguish between taste-based and statistical discrimination, and note that they cannot definitively differentiate between the two explanations (p. 473).

Responsiveness in Modern Democracies: The Case of the United Kingdom

Why do we find evidence of such discrimination and bias in the responsiveness of elected officials? Building on the extant literature, we can expect legislator responsiveness to constituents concerns to be shaped by two broad sets of factors: strategic considerations linked to the electoral calculus (either their personal desire for re-election or the electoral prospects of their party)—which has been referred to as “statistical discrimination”; and a psychological disposition toward ingroup bias that conditions human interaction in general, and which is known also to play a role in political communication—referred to as “taste-based discrimination” (Broockman, 2013; Butler and Broockman, 2011; Butler, 2014; Dropp and Peskowitz, 2012). We consider these explanations in the context the United Kingdom, which we argue is an influential and compelling case, what many perceive as an exemplar of parliamentary democracy.

For several reasons, the United Kingdom represents a crucial test for responsiveness. First, there is a long-held view that addressing constituents’ needs is intrinsic to the UK government, a stronger association in the UK than in the US context. The role of Parliament at Westminster in the “redress of grievances” is as old as the institution itself, and in fact, was the body’s original function for several hundred years after its establishment in the 13th century (Beer, 1969; Searing, 1994). British parliamentary tradition dictates that constituents can have a reasonable expectation that their concerns and problems will be dealt with in a non-partisan manner (Dowse, 1963; Munroe, 1977). Though this is an ancient role, it is by no means on the wane; on the contrary, the amount of constituency service undertaken by MPs has risen substantially in recent decades, with Members of Parliament increasingly perceived by voters as ombudsmen to whom they can and should be able to turn with a variety of problems (Cain et al., 1987; Kavanagh, 1970; Norton and Wood, 1993; Searing, 1994; Vivyan and Wagner, 2016). Today a number of Members of Parliament attest to often receiving hundreds of emails per day, and indeed the advent of the Internet has led

to a marked increase on the demands made of MPs by their constituents (Williamson, 2009; Pattie et al., 2004), with email as the principal means today through which constituents communicate with their MPs (Norton, 2012). Allen and Birch (2015) maintain that “being a ‘good constituency member’ is probably more important today than at any other point in the modern era of mass democracy” (46). Citizens’ expectations for MPs to help resolve problems, and MPs understanding that such a responsibility is an important component of their occupation, make Great Britain an excellent laboratory for research on responsiveness.

Second, tests for biases in representation have mostly overlooked established parliamentary systems. Parliamentary systems more generally are an ideal context in which to study variations in constituency service for several reasons. First, citizens in such systems have demands from MPs for both policy provisions and for casework. Second and related, strong party discipline rules out most forms of pork barrel politics; legislators are under pressure to vote with their parties, and they are typically unable and/or unwilling to seek particularistic rewards for the territories they represent. The casework they receive from constituents is thus *one of the only vehicles* at their disposal for cultivating personal votes. This means that elected representatives in parliamentary states, especially those with single-member district electoral systems like Britain, can be expected to have strong incentives to use casework to their best advantage Lundberg (2007). Moreover, legislators are the main political actors in parliamentary systems. This is all the more the case in strongly centralized unitary systems such as the UK. British voters have limited opportunities for venue shopping, as local councilors have few powers, most municipalities do not have directly-elected mayors, and most citizens are not covered by another elected government (e.g. the devolved Scottish Parliament). If citizens want help from an elected representative, their Member of Parliament is one of the few people to whom they can turn. This makes responses to constituent communications all the more important.

Of course the common usage of proportional representation systems in parliamentary democracies confounds the study of responsiveness, as citizens’ ties to their representatives

are not so territorial. The use of the first-past-the-post system—single member districts with plurality voting—both preserves accountability to a particular constituency, and also creates greater incentives to cultivate a personal vote than in other parliamentary systems in Europe (Lundberg (2007)).² Although it may be the case that the personal vote is more limited in British politics in comparison to the US (Cain et al., 1984, 1987), there remains widespread belief that the quality of MPs’ constituency service has electoral consequences (Cain et al., 1984; Gaines, 1998; Lundberg, 2007). And the fact that constituencies in Britain are far smaller in population size than in the US should create added incentives for providing high quality and timely responses.

Third, whereas tests in the US context have been focused primarily on responsiveness to constituents of differing race and ethnicity, the context of the United Kingdom also permits an exploration of the role of class. Class has long been the defining cleavage in UK politics (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 172-92; Heath et al., 1991, p. 62-84) and has been shown to be a strong determinant of political judgment (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Evans, 1997; Heath et al., 1991).³ A person’s occupation thus provides legislators with a rough-and-ready guide to the likelihood that a constituent will turnout. Concerning ethnicity, given sizable populations of citizens from other areas of the world living in the UK, it is also possible to expand the study of inequalities in representation to other populations, including those from South Asia.

Fourth, as in other contexts, constituent casework is typically dealt with by staff hired from funds provided to legislators explicitly for this purpose—although in similarity to the US, there is considerable discretion in how MPs and their staffs provide casework. As we highlighted above, elected representatives typically find themselves overwhelmed by requests, and decisions over the provision of personal assistance to individual constituents are typically governed by few formal or partisan constraints.⁴ Legislators have considerable discretion

²The UK is, of course, representative of an entire class of Westminster-style democracies.

³Though the role of class as a predictor of vote choice has attenuated in recent years, it still serves an important role in shaping political judgments (see Clarke et al., 2004, p. 40-50; Clarke et al., 2009, p. 166).

⁴As testament to MPs’ pressing schedules, consider that a significant number earn income from consul-

in deciding to whom they respond, how they respond, and how fast they respond—which provides the basis for observing biases in representation.

Factors Influencing Responsiveness in the United Kingdom

Although norms and culture dictate a high value for constituency service, given the aforementioned time demands and the discretion MPs exercise, MPs may use what limited information they do have to draw inferences about petitioners that could lead to biases in their communication and representation. We identify two relevant factors: strategic and psychological concerns, sometimes referred to as “statistical” and “taste-based” discrimination respectively. The former refers to expectations based on past observable trends, whereas the latter is based on factors such as race (for a discussion, see p. 465 of Butler, 2014). Regarding strategic incentives in responsiveness, politicians and their staff could make assumptions about the petitioner’s likelihood of being politically active. Unlike some other Western democracies, turnout rates in the UK have hovered in the mid 60 percentile for the last several general elections. As has been shown in other contexts as well, in the UK higher income is associated with a higher rate of turnout (Bartle and Skirmuntt, 2017; Heath, 2016; Clarke et al., 2004), and thus voters working in more professional occupations could be advantaged when reaching out to their MPs. MPs may perceive these likely voters as ones who can be mobilized and as potentially persuadable, more likely to convey electoral support in exchange for exemplary casework. Alternatively, MPs may perceive those working in less professional occupation as less likely to punish them at the electoral booth for substandard casework. Concerning ethnicity, turnout rates among ethnic minorities and Whites are very similar (Heath and Khan, 2012; Heath et al., 2013). Thus strategic concerns should arise via petitioners’ occupations, and less so for their ethnicities.

The second major set of factors that can be hypothesized to affect legislator responsiveness can be adduced from the literature in social psychology over taste-based discrimination.

tancies and other occupations, meaning that their service in the legislature is not their sole responsibility.

There is ample evidence of bias toward “ingroups,” or those with whom the individual identifies (Allen and Wilder, 1975; Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Huddy, 2003, 2013; Mullen et al., 1992; Tajfel et al., 1971). In-group bias could manifest in two ways, one concerning shared occupation and the other the shared ethnicity—both of which are highly salient identity markers in Britain. As aforementioned, occupation-based distinctions such as class have been the principal political cleavage in UK politics (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Heath et al., 1991; Robertson, 1984), and in recent years, ethnicity has come to play a larger role in structuring politics (Heath et al., 2011; Sobolewska et al., 2013). Concerning shared class, although occupation-based ingroup bias has been studied less often than racial bias, there are good reasons for anticipating it here. MPs are members of a professional occupational category, and constituents who come from similar occupational backgrounds may be privileged as ingroup members. Ethnic ingroup bias is a well-known characteristic of interpersonal interaction that manifests in a variety of settings, including a substantial body of evidence of bias in politicians’ responses from the US (Butler, 2014), South Africa (McClendon, 2016), and China (Distelhorst and Hou, 2014; Meng et al., 2017). Politicians predominantly identify as White even in the face of a large and growing ethnic population (Martin, 2016).

On the basis of these considerations, we expect to find that strategic and psychological considerations shape constituency service and representation. Legislators and their staff may be more communicative toward constituents who are more likely to vote and that have socioeconomic characteristics closer to the modal characteristics of the political elite, including professional occupation and majority group ethnicity. Moreover, if taste-based discrimination exists, then we anticipate that there will be an interaction between the occupation and ethnicity, inasmuch as the ingroup for the vast majority of MPs is composed of White professionals (Martin, 2016), and as a result, petitioners sharing both a professional occupation and ethnicity could receive better constituency service. If taste-based discrimination exists, then petitioners who are White and from a professional class should be the most likely to receive a response, and one that is fast and helpful. Those who are non-White and from a

non-professional class should be the least likely. If statistical discrimination exists, then we should observe less responsiveness to petitioners from a professional background, but little differences based on the ethnicity of the constituent given similar rates in turnout among Whites and non-Whites. Thus our experimental manipulation below varies both the occupation and ethnicity of the petitioner, and thus we can explore the quality of responsiveness and representation, first overall, and then by the attributes of the petitioner.

Requests for Assistance to Members of the UK Parliament

We adopt a field experimental approach, randomly assigning Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom to receive email requests from four different constituents, where the putative ethnicity and the occupation of the (fictitious) emailer are varied. As we have discussed, our study is similar to a number of recent field experiments in this area (for an overview, see Grose, 2014). In most experiments, it is customary for researchers to seek informed consent of any research participant. In our context, however, seeking such consent threatens the validity of our design, as politicians are likely to behave differently—in this case, to be more responsive—if they are aware that they are under observation. We do recognize there are ethical concerns in contacting MPs without first requesting their consent to participate and with the deception here employed. Here we believe that the importance of the research involving fundamental questions about democratic representation and good governance justifies the relatively mild inconvenience of receiving and responding to a brief email. Informed consent addresses the risk of harm to individuals, allowing them the opportunity to opt out from participation. We therefore took steps to ensure that harm would be mitigated, using a treatment of the kind that politicians would be accustomed to receiving, and drafting an email whose response would require minimal time. We patterned our communication after Butler and Broockman (2011), who argue that their work is comparable to a similar earlier

experiment by Putnam (1993) whom they quote as using a “slightly deceptive, but innocuous and highly informative” (p. 73) approach (for similar field experimental designs with contacts to politicians, job employers, and even university professors, see also Butler, 2014; Butler and Broockman, 2011; Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; Vaccari, 2014; Milkman et al., 2015). Our brief email used a complaint about noise from neighbors, a problem stated explicitly, and one that we expected would elicit a short and fast response. As our email did not contain contact information, and because of MPs are prohibited by law from helping citizens outside their constituency, we assumed that responses would typically be a brief request for an address. Beyond concerns over the time MPs invest, we have at the urging of the Institutional Review Board taken steps to ensure that information on the responsiveness of any given MP is protected, so that our results will not impugn a given politician. Finally, it can be noted that our study falls in the vein of audit studies conducted by federal agencies Fix and Turner (1998) and even by journalists in the United Kingdom. Thus with these and related considerations in mind we proceeded to conduct our study.

As we noted, our approach is experimental. The advantage of field experiments is that they offer superior leverage in assessing causality. Any other factor that can be assumed to influence responsiveness—e.g. the seat safety of the MP, her age, whether the MP was away from his office for a holiday—can be assumed to be controlled, and we can observe directly the effect of the treatment on responsiveness. We created email aliases that signified two different ethnic identities and two different occupations. What we do lack is a true control condition, as we did not use any emails that did not indicate both a name and occupation, as sending an email without a name is almost certain to invoke a nonresponse on the part of an MPs or their staffs. Thus we make comparisons across treatments, rather than from a treatment to a control.

Armed with the names of each Member of the UK Parliament, we located the email addresses for 643 of the 650 MPs from the Parliamentary website in July of 2014. When multiple email addresses were provided—typically a Parliamentary account ending in “@parlia-

ment.uk” and a constituency email address—we recorded and used up to two email addresses.⁵ We then randomly assigned the 643 MPs to one of four treatment conditions, where the name and occupation of the emailer varied.⁶ We chose both names and occupations that would be likely to be present in any one district. To designate occupation, MPs received emails from either an “accountant” or from a “builder.” In Britain, the term “builder” is a general term that covers work in construction. According to the U.K. Office of National Statistics, a builder could be one who pours concrete, installs plumbing, lay tiles and brick, cuts steel, repairs fencing, and more. According to the same Office, no formal academic qualifications are required for work as a builder.⁷ Concerning names, we varied the alias of the emailer between “John Williams” and “Mohammed Khan”, both popular names in Britain. We also selected a problem that would be universal across districts—issues with noisy neighbors. And so that the identity of the emailer would not be associated with any individual in the district, and so MPs and their staff would not first look up an address—we noted in our email communication that the petitioner “recently moved into [the] constituency.”

Our personal communications supplied only a limited amount of information about constituents, but nonetheless, sufficient detail to enable MPs and their staff to use heuristics to make judgments. The listed occupation, subtly communicated in the first sentence, signals the profession and class of the emailer, and thus both the propensity of the emailer to be politically active and whether he is an outgroup member. The signature, the choice of names, captures ethnicity and provides ingroup/outgroup information, with Khan designating a person from South Asia and likely to be Muslim. Finally, our email also communicates a sense of urgency and a need for intervention on the part of the MP/staff, given that other options

⁵We eliminated from our study the 7 MPs for whom a parliament or constituency email address was not listed.

⁶We used simple random assignment, rather than block random assignment. Unlike the US context, the covariates on which to block are less clear in the UK. We did, however, test the randomization using observable covariates, and found no statistically significant differences in political party, gender of the MP, or region using chi-squared tests.

⁷See the Standard Occupational Classification of the UK Office of National Statistics for the occupation “Builder” (code 5319), available at this link: <https://onsdigital.github.io/dp-classification-tools/standard-occupational-classification/data/SingleClass.html?soc=5319>

have been exhausted. Thus we used a treatment that could be universal across districts, arise from any type of petitioner, and required some action soon given the annoyance of noise—but not a matter as urgent as an emergency. Those reading the email should perceive that there is a persistent and nontrivial problem, and that help is required to resolve it.

Our email solicitation appears as follows, with treatments represented by italicized text:

Dear (Name of MP),

I recently moved into your constituency, and I work full time as a *builder/accountant*. I am writing to ask for your help with a noise problem I’ve been having with my neighbours. I tried talking to them, but that hasn’t helped. I’ve tried complaining to the council, but they haven’t helped either. I’m not sure what else I can do.

Would you be willing to help me?

Yours sincerely,

John Williams/Mohammed Khan

Email contacts were made over a narrow window of time. We created several email accounts that included the names of the emailers plus a superfluous five digits.⁸ So as not to raise suspicion, emails were distributed during the late afternoon or early evening of the 29th or 30th of July, 2014, hours when full-time workers could be away from their positions. After sending the notes, we recorded the response from MPs, and whether we received a personal response of any sort (coded 1), or whether we received no response. Form email replies that were not personalized to the sender were considered a nonresponse and coded 0. Our standard for *responsiveness* and representation is thus fairly low, in part because MPs are only legally allowed to offer assistance to those located in their constituency. Our expectation was that we would receive a personal email response requesting contact information—an address or phone number where the citizen could be reached—with a brief request for additional

⁸Because of restrictions placed by Gmail on the number of highly similar emails sent out in a narrow window of time, we choose to create 16 accounts, one-half using the alias John Williams and the other one-half with name Mohammed Khan. We then distributed as many as 40 emails from any one account over a narrow window of time.

information.⁹ If such an email arrived from an MP or his/her staff, it was coded as 1, no matter its brevity.¹⁰ Two researchers coded each email to ensure inter-coder reliability.¹¹

Before moving to the findings, we once more revisit our theoretical expectations. Concerning statistical discrimination, we would expect to see a difference in responses accountants than to builders, given differences in rates of turnout, and the importance of class in British society. It is also the case that accountants could motivate in-group biases, given the more similar professional occupation. Second, we anticipate that taste-based, in-group discrimination could lead to differential responsiveness to emails from Williams versus Kahn, given that the majority of MPs are white. The interaction should prove most revealing, with the expectation that Accountant Williams would receive the highest level of response, and Builder Kahn, the lowest.

Findings

We first examine overall responsiveness, and second we focus on the question of whether representation is biased by the petitioner’s occupation or ethnicity. It is important to recognize that we are examining the first stage of responsiveness and representation. We cannot, due to the nature of the design, follow later stages, for example what steps would be undertaken on behalf of a given petitioner to address the noise problem. But without a response to an email, no further constituency service and representation can be undertaken, and thus this first step is a crucial one. We present the first set of findings in Table 1.

Table 1 demonstrates a very high level of communicativeness, far greater than what has been reported in the United States and elsewhere, particularly when compared to Vaccari

⁹With consultation from our university’s Ethics committee, for those emails to which we received a response from the MP or his staff, we followed with another email to bring closure to our experiment. This second email noted: “Dear X, Thank you for your offer of help. I’ve told my neighbours that I’ve contacted both the council and my MP, and things have got better. I’ll get in touch with you again if necessary.”

¹⁰We received a number of one-sentence responses in a short period of time from the personal accounts of MPs, some with indications in the signature that the message had been written by a smartphone or tablet.

¹¹Across 587 received emails, the two coders disagreed only once—a mere clerical error, with the coder missing the full text of the email.

(2014)’s crossnational study. Indeed, across all treatments, a remarkable 91 percent of emails received a reply. Given the time demands facing MPs, that 91% of emails are returned is striking. It is also worth noting that the differences in response rates to accountants vs builders (91.7 to 90.1), or to Williams vs Khan (92.7 to 89.3), are not statistically significant.¹² We do not find evidence of either statistical or taste-based discrimination in Table 1.

Table 1: Responsiveness of MPs to Requests for Help by Occupation and Ethnicity

| Emailer | Total N | N of Reply (Percent) |
|------------|---------|-------------------------|
| All Emails | 643 | 585 (91.0) |
| Accountant | 339 | 311 (91.7) |
| Builder | 304 | 274 (90.1) |
| Williams | 316 | 293 (92.7) |
| Khan | 327 | 292 (89.3) |

However, it is important to recognize that our treatments included an identifier of *both* putative occupation and ethnicity. Thus we turn to Table 2 where we present the interaction among occupation and ethnicity. To illustrate, here we can ask, for example, whether the effect of being a builder is conditional on whether the emailer is John Williams or Mohammed Khan. In Table 2, we now observe discrepancies and biases in response. Although there is a small difference in response rates between Accountant Williams and Accountant Khan (7.9 vs 8.6 percent), these differences are not statistically significant. That we do not find substantial differences between these two petitioners is also noteworthy, as it rules out an alternative explanation—that despite a significant number of Mohammed Khans in Great Britain, MPs perceived that it was unlikely for there to be an Accountant Khan in their

¹²We used difference of means and logit models.

respective constituency. What we do find is that there is an observable difference between the two builders based on their ethnicity. Builder Khan (BK) received the lowest rate of response. For comparison, Builder Khan sees more than twice the number of emails with no response (13.1 percent) than does Builder Williams (6.6 percent), and at least 4.5 percent less responses than for the two accountants. Applying 4 unique logit models with each individual petitioner as the sole respective explanatory variable, we find that lower response to Builder Khan is statistically significant. Thus we observe inequalities in responsiveness when considering the interaction of ethnicity and occupation, with ethnic builders facing discrimination compared to the other petitioners.

Table 2: Responsiveness of MPs to Requests for Help by Treatment Condition

| Emailer | Total N | N of Reply (Percent) |
|---------------------|---------|-------------------------|
| Accountant Williams | 165 | 152 (92.1) |
| Accountant Khan | 174 | 159 (91.4) |
| Builder Williams | 151 | 141 (93.4) |
| Builder Khan | 153 | 133 (86.9)* |

* indicates $p < .05$

Returning to MPs’ strategic and psychological motivations, we find evidence that what is most consequential is the interaction of biases. We hypothesized earlier that statistical discrimination would manifest in differences among occupation, and less so in differences among ethnicity, with those emails originating from more professional occupations receiving more offers of help. We also hypothesized two forms of in-group bias, the first which argues that professional occupations will be advantaged; and the second that argues that those of the same ethnic in-group will receive better representation. We also raised the possibility that even one outgroup marker could matter, which we do not find to be true. Were it the

case that only one identifier was sufficient to distort representation, then we would have seen Accountant Williams receive a significantly higher rate of responses than that of all other petitioners. This is not the case. We do find that one interaction matters: occupation/class and ethnicity. This conditional effect represents the confluence of strategic concerns (with builders less likely to turnout) and psychological concerns (with builders coming from a less professional class—and with Khan representing an ethnic outgroup).

Biases in Representation: The Expediency of Response

Our analysis also considers the timeliness and expediency of response—how fast MPs reply to the request for help. Timeliness has been understudied in this area, with the exception of Einstein and Glick (2017) who examine the proportion of responses received within 24 hours. Here we ask whether the occupation and ethnicity of the emailer has implications for how quickly MPs and their staff reply. We noted that there was a sense of urgency conveyed in our treatment, the other options had been exhausted and yet the noise problem remained. Thus normatively, we should expect not only a response, but an *expedient* one. However, both strategic and ingroup biases could have implications for timeliness, leading to slower responses for constituents who are perceived as being more difficult to mobilize or members of an outgroup, or both. To examine the expediency of response, we first present descriptive statistics, and then follow with an event history analysis—the appropriate statistical tool for modeling the timing of email replies.

Concerning the data, we recorded the date and time of our email to the MP, and the date and time of the reply we received, if any. We then converted the duration of the delay from email sent to email received into 24 hour intervals, and then for ease of interpretation into days. That is, if a response was received within 24 hours of sending the email, we record the response as having been received within one day. A response arriving 76 hours following the email would be considered to have arrived on the 4th day. We present the distribution of duration of replies in Table 3.

Table 3: Time of Response Overall and by Treatment Condition

| Days | Overall Responses (Percent) | Builder Khan (Percent) | Builder Williams (Percent) | Accountant Khan (Percent) | Accountant Williams (Percent) |
|------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | 406 (63.1) | 86 (56.2) | 106 (70.2) | 110 (63.2) | 104 (63.0) |
| 2 | 65 (10.1) | 15 (9.8) | 14 (9.3) | 15 (8.6) | 21 (12.7) |
| 3-5 | 38 (5.9) | 14 (9.2) | 6 (3.4) | 11 (6.3) | 7 (4.2) |
| 6-10 | 45 (7.0) | 8 (5.2) | 13 (8.6) | 11 (6.3) | 13 (7.9) |
| 11-20 | 23 (3.6) | 6 (3.9) | 2 (1.3) | 10 (5.7) | 5 (3.0) |
| 21-56 | 8 (1.2) | 4 (2.6) | 0 (0.0) | 2 (1.1) | 2 (1.2) |
| Unanswered | 58 (9.0) | 20 (13.1) | 10 (6.6) | 15 (8.6) | 13 (7.9) |
| N | 643 | 153 | 151 | 174 | 165 |

Ns for each cell are followed by percents for each cell in parentheses

As one can see in the first column of Table 3, a high percentage of our email requests were responded to within one day—in fact, 63.1 percent. The observed *rate* of responsiveness within one day is substantial. Indeed our responsiveness within one day is greater than the mean level of replies received to both kinds of emails sent in (Vaccari, 2014). Within a 48 hour window, nearly three-quarters of all emails receive a response (73.2/

Still, there is some cause for concern. When one looks more closely by treatment condition, one observes considerable disparities. First, the percentage of emails from Builder Khan replied to within one day is a mere 56.2, nearly 7 percent below the mean. In contrast, responses to emails from Builder Williams within one day are 7 percent above the mean—making the distinction between ethnicity for builders substantial—a total difference of 14 percentage points between BK and BW. To better understand the dynamics of response, we turn to an event history framework. Event history is the preferred method for capturing the dynamics of the occurrence of events, as unlike other forms of maximum likelihood

estimation, event history models explicitly incorporate information about right-censored observations (here, the 58 emails that go unanswered) into the likelihood function. We use a Cox proportional hazards model, a semi-parametric estimation preferred when the underlying distribution is unknown (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, 2004).¹³ To recapitulate, our dependent variable represents the days until a response, numbered by 24 hour periods from the time that our email was sent to MPs.¹⁴

Table 4: Event History Models of Response Bias by Treatment Condition

| Explanatory Variable | Accountant Williams | Accountant Khan | Builder Williams | Builder Khan |
|----------------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| | 0.046 (0.090) | . | . | . |
| | . | -0.009 (.090) | . | . |
| | . | . | 0.208* (0.094) | . |
| | . | . | . | -0.230* (0.097) |
| N of MPs | 643 | 643 | 643 | 643 |
| N of Responses | 585 | 585 | 585 | 585 |
| N of Observations | 4892 | 4892 | 4892 | 4892 |

Cox Proportional Hazard models with Efron method for ties. Models estimated in Stata 14

Coefficients are followed by robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by MP

Tests of the Schoenfeld and scaled Schoenfeld residuals indicate no violation of the proportional hazards assumption

* indicates $p < .05$

Table 4 estimates four individual event history models, where each email petitioner serves as the sole explanatory variable in each respective model. Where we observe the largest differential treatment is in the timing of the response. That is, our earlier analysis indicated that there were only limited differences between occupational and ethnic groups in the overall response. When we considered the interaction between these two categories, it was only Builder Khan who witnessed a statistically significant difference in response. Here, though,

¹³We use the Efron method in the event of ties. Models were estimated in Stata 14

¹⁴We estimated additional models with control variables included such as party and region dummies, and our substantive results hold.

we see conditional effects, where both Builder Williams and Builder Khan are discernably different. BW is significantly *more likely* to receive a fast response, while BK is significantly *less likely* to receive a timely response. If statistical discrimination is to account for differential responses, then we would have expected Builder Kahn and Builder Williams to be less likely to receive a response, as builders are less likely to be voters than accountants.

The Builder Khan finding is consistent with expectations that strategic considerations related to mobilization and ingroup bias will affect efficiency, as was demonstrated above; however, the Builder Williams finding is more unexpected. As we argued earlier, if both strategic considerations and ingroup bias drove faster responses among our Williams' emailers, then our expectation should be that Accountant Williams would receive notably faster responses than Builder Williams. Why MPs and their staff respond more quickly to BW than to the others requires further exploration.

Although we implement an experimental study using randomization, we do explore more deeply the factors that account for the timing of response by incorporating a series of additional explanatory variables.¹⁵ We note, however, that district characteristics are unavailable for MPs from Northern Ireland. First, it may be that MPs who are more electorally vulnerable will be more likely to respond to email petitioners, and thus we include a dummy variable for whether the district was carried by 55.0 percent or more in the 2015 election (denoted 1) or carried by 54.9 percent or less (0) denoted *Safe Seat*.¹⁶ We also include measures related to the MP representing the district. First, given the association of the Labour party with appeals to working classes and diversity, we include a dummy variable for whether the MP belonged to the *Labour party*. We also include a dummy variable for whether the MP belonged to the other major party, the *Conservative*—where the excluded category is all other parties.¹⁷ Second, we include a measure for the *Race* of the MP, where

¹⁵We thank Pippa Norris for making available constituency data on her website in the British General Election Constituency Results.

¹⁶Our analysis was conducted in 2014, and thus we rely on the 2015 election results which were closer to the time of analysis than the 2010 ones.

¹⁷The LibDems are the largest party in the excluded category.

nonWhite MPs are coded as 1 and Whites as 0. Third, we include a measure of the *Sex* of the MP, with males coded as 1. We include 4 additional characteristics of the district. These are the *District Ethnicity*, which speaks to the percentage White. We incorporate the percentage of constituents working in *District Finance*, given that districts with high levels of financial industry may be more inclined to respond to an accountant petitioner. Similarly because emails came from a builder, we include *District Construction* that measures the percent of the constituency whose occupation is in construction. Finally, as a control we include regional dummy variables for whether the district was located in *Scotland*, *Wales*, or *Northern Ireland*, with England as the excluded category.

We estimate three models. For efficiency as shown in Model 1, we now include Accountant Williams, Accountant Kahn, and Builder Williams in our model at one time, with Builder Kahn as the excluded category. In Model 2, we add the first set of additional variables, which are available for all MPs in our analysis. Because constituency characteristics are not available for Northern Ireland, we estimate a third model that includes these characteristics but excludes the MPs from Northern Ireland, thus decreasing our overall N. Because model residuals indicated violations of the Cox proportional hazards assumption for two variables, model 2 is stratified on these variables, *Race* and *Northern Ireland*. For Model 3, as again revealed by the Schoenfeld and scaled Schoenfeld residuals, we found *Race* to violate the proportionality assumption, and thus stratify on this variable.

Turning to the results in Table 5, with Builder Kahn as the excluded category, we again see that expediency of response to emails by Builder Williams is significantly greater than for the other petitioners. In Models 2 and 3 that include the additional explanatory variables, we see that the rates of reply to emails from Accountant Williams approaches statistical significance at standard levels. Turning to the additional explanatory variables, we find that the safety of the seat is consequential, statistically significant in Model 3. As we can see from the negative sign on the variable, the safer the seat, the slower the response rate of MPs to emails. Notably other measures such as the ethnic composition of the district, nor

Table 5: Event History Models of Response Bias by Treatment Condition

| Explanatory Variable | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Accountant Williams | 0.208 (0.116) | 0.217 [†] (0.116) | 0.205 [†] (0.117) |
| Accountant Kahn | 0.167 (0.115) | 0.162 (0.117) | 0.134 (0.119) |
| Builder Williams | 0.336* (0.119) | 0.345* (0.118) | 0.329* (0.119) |
| Safe Seat | . | -0.175 [†] (0.094) | -0.199* (0.094) |
| Labour | . | .108 (0.148) | 0.117 (0.148) |
| Conservative | . | 0.134 (0.148) | 0.143 (0.156) |
| Race | . | . | . |
| Sex | . | -0.005 (0.100) | -0.020 (0.015) |
| District Ethnicity | . | . | 0.003 (0.003) |
| District Finance | . | . | -0.021 (0.015) |
| District Construction | . | . | -0.028 (0.027) |
| Scotland | . | 0.067 (0.157) | 0.041 (0.169) |
| Wales | . | -0.073 (0.192) | -0.111 (0.196) |
| Northern Ireland | . | . | . |
| N of MPs | 643 | 643 | 625 |
| N of Responses | 585 | 585 | 574 |
| N of Observations | 4892 | 4892 | 4483 |

Cox Proportional Hazard models with Efron method for ties. Models estimated in Stata 14.

Coefficients are followed by robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by MP.

Tests of the Schoenfeld and scaled Schoenfeld residuals indicate *Northern Ireland* and *Race* in Model 2 violated the Cox proportionality assumption. We stratified Model 2 by these two variables.

Tests of the Schoenfeld and scaled Schoenfeld residuals indicate *Race* in Model 3 violated the Cox proportionality assumption. We stratified Model 3 by this variable.

* indicates $p < .05$ and British General Election Constituency Results

the percentage of constituents in the construction and finance industries, are consequential. Related, the political party of the MP, nor his/her sex is statistically significant in capturing the timing of the response.

Biases in Representation: The Quality of Response

We turn to our final analysis that speaks again to the quality of representation. We look at the helpfulness of the response based on its content. Explorations of the quality of response in audit experiments can raise concerns over post-treatment bias, given that an email reply is a post-treatment outcome Montgomery et al. (2018); Coppock (2018). Coppock (2018) offers three approaches, and we adopt the third, to “redefine the outcome.” (p.3) In likemanner to (Kalla et al., 2018), we consider a non-responses as 0 on the relevant indicators of the helpfulness of the response.

Similar to Einstein and Glick (2017)’s exploration of “friendliness,” we look at what we term “helpfulness,” which we operationalize in several ways described below. Prior to introducing our measures, it is first useful to consider a fairly typical email response of 49 words, shown below, which was professional in correspondence, included a salutation and a closing, offered help, and requested contact information and additional details about the problem. Where additional information was included in an email, it typically noted one or more of the following: the necessity for the petitioner to be located within the district; that noise problems were the purview of the Council or police; contact information for the Council; specific ways the MP could intervene; requested a meeting, and others.

Dear Mr (Name of Emailer),

Thank you for your recent e-mail to (Name of MP).

I will do what I can to help. I would grateful if you could provide me with your contact telephone number, your full postal address and an outline of the problems you are experiencing with your neighbours.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Our measures of helpfulness include the following: mean number of words included in responses; whether a personal greeting was offered; and a code for the helpfulness of the reply.¹⁸ Concerning the first, we examine differences in the mean number of words received, which we argue is one measure to capture the willingness of MPs to intervene.¹⁹ Because of the random assignment of petitioners to MPs, we should expect that MPs who are likely to craft short responses (which was common among responses received via a smartphone)—or MPs who are likely to write a lengthy reply, are as likely to be present in one treatment as any other. Thus notable differences in mean number of words used in response give us an added layer of insight into the quality of representation. Across all MP replies, the mean number of words was 55.7. Second, we follow from Einstein and Glick (2016) who operationalize “friendliness” and the tone of email responses by examining whether emailers were greeted personally. Similar to their coding, any mention of the person’s first or last name was coded as a personal greeting (here, coded 1), whether in the context of Dear Mr (the modal response) or Hi John/Mohammed. Emails lacking a personal greetings were coded 0. Across all treatment conditions, 81.5 percent of emails contained a personal greeting, a rate greater than Einstein and Glick (2016) observe. Third, two coders read each email carefully and evaluated the responses, with the instructions to assign a score for a basic response (0) and a helpful one (1). Those scored 0 simply requested contact information and little more. We also coded any nonresponses as 0. Those scoring 1 mentioned something about the noise problem or neighbors and offered help in some way. For reference, the example response shown above would be scored 1. Of the 585 email responses received and coded, the coders agreed in 512 instances (87%). Where there was disagreement, so as not to bias the results toward unhelpfulness, the higher score was used. In the end, 419 emails were coded as 1 for

¹⁸Again each of these outcomes is scored 0 for an MP who does not respond.

¹⁹We begin the word count with the salutation (e.g. “Dear Mr. Williams”), and conclude with the final word before the closing (e.g. excluding “With best wishes, Name of MP”). In instances where we received more than one email response, sometimes from more than one staffer, or from an MP and a member of staff, we used the longest response.

helpful, which is 71.6 percent of all email replies received, or 65.2 percent overall including nonreplies. Again considering first that our emails lacked an address and that MPs by law are prohibited from extending constituency services to those outside their district; and second, that noise problems are under the auspices of the city councils or police, such a high level of helpfulness shows that email petitioners in the UK are being served well.

In Table 6 we look again to determine whether we see biases in the quality of representation by the petitioner by examining the differences in means.²⁰ We note again that our analysis includes counts for only those emails where we received a response, as we wish to compare and contrast whether certain petitioners are treated differently even after they receive a reply. Thus we do not model nonresponses in Table 6.

Table 6: Helpfulness of Response to MPs to Requests for Help by Treatment Condition

| Measure | Accountant Williams | Accountant Khan | Builder Williams | Builder Khan |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Mean Number of Words | 55.3 | 52.6 | 63.3* | 52.1 |
| Mean Percent with Personal Greeting | 84.2 | 80.5 | 82.8 | 78.4 |
| Mean Percent of Helpful Responses | 69.1 | 66.7 | 63.6 | 60.8 |

* indicates $p < .05$

In the table we find less evidence of discrimination than in our earlier analyses. Although the means are lower for Builder Khan for all three variables, the differences are not statistically significant.²¹ The one result that is statistically significant is for the number of words included in emails to Builder Williams, with the mean of 63.3 substantially higher than for the others. Beyond this one result, we find the content of MP emails are not influenced in a meaningful way by the petitioner. This is a normatively positive sign.

²⁰We recognize that means here represent counts. Findings from count models are consistent with what we show here.

²¹We estimated t-tests, logit models, and in the case of the mean number of words, a negative binomial regression.

Discussion

Our study has explored biases in representation in a new and important context, the United Kingdom. We have argued that it is important for the literature to move beyond studies conducted primarily in the US to examine responsiveness in an established parliamentary systems. We have shown that the UK context is an apt place for such work, particularly given the Parliament’s long-standing reputation for serving constituent needs—and the similarity of the voting system to the US also means that there is a greater incentive for politicians to cultivate a personal vote in the UK than in other parts of Western Europe. We have focused on two considerations shaping MPs’ willingness to answer emails in Britain: strategic factors based on a calculus of how likely the petitioner is to vote; and ingroup biases based on both the ethnicity and class of the constituent. Our study employed a field experimental design to test inequalities in representation, varying the occupation and ethnicity of the petitioner, with emails sent by accountants or builders and by John Williams or Mohammed Khan.

We have highlighted several critical findings. First, that overall responsiveness is markedly high—much higher than what has been shown in studies conducted in other contexts. On average, a mere 9 percent of emails go without a personal reply from MPs or their staff. We argued that the context of the UK is an excellent laboratory for testing responsiveness given that the evolution of Parliament was tied to the value for constituency service; that because of strong party discipline, casework represents one of the few means whereby MPs can cultivate a personal vote; that class has been a defining cleavage in UK politics; and that in similarity to the US, MPs and staff have discretion on whether to respond to petitioners, and how fast and helpful their responses will be. The overall rate of responsiveness demonstrates that MPs have a high value and are dedicated to constituency service.

Second, We also did not observe statistically significant differences across our manipulation for class, accountant vs. builder, or for ethnicity, Williams vs. Khan. In-group identifiers that could provoke taste-based discrimination, nor professional markers signaling a higher propensity to turnout, did not generate statistically significant patterns of representation.

However, we observed an interaction effect between occupation and ethnicity, with greater divergence in ethnicity-based responsiveness for putative lower-class constituents than for higher-class constituents. The response rate for Builder Khan was substantially lower than for the others. Related, when we moved beyond simply whether MPs reply to *how fast* they reply, our event history analysis uncovered more substantial disparities in representation. Indeed it is in the expediency of response where we see the greatest inequality. Here we found that Builder Khan received the slowest response, and Builder Williams the fastest. Our expectation was that Accountant Williams would have received the highest response given the shared professional occupation and ethnicity, and the greater propensity to vote. The fact that Builder Williams receives the highest response requires further exploration.

Third, although we implemented an experimental design where factors accounting for responsiveness were assumed to be controlled across conditions, we explored additional explanatory variables that could account for responsiveness. Here we found that MPs from safer seats were slower to respond, but additional factors such as party, the gender of the MP, or characteristics of the constituency were not statistically significant predictors. Fourth we probed the quality of representative service, using more granular indicators of legislator effort and helpfulness to constituents. In this final analysis, we saw little evidence for bias, with the exception that the mean number of words was higher for replies to Builder Williams. Generally once an email reply is sent, its content is not dependent on the petitioner requesting help. In like manner to the high level of overall responsiveness, the latter finding is encouraging from a normative perspective. MPs and staffs on the whole craft rather helpful responses.

Citizens expect to be able to communicate their needs and concerns to those who provide them with services, including the democratic service of representation. These expectations pose immense challenges to legislators, who are obliged to respond to large volumes of email in a courteous and timely manner in order to live up to constituent demands. Despite finding an overall high degree of professionalism and efficiency in British MPs handling of constituent

inquiries, bias was nevertheless apparent in the efficiency of response. When pressures are intense, the communications of certain types of constituents are treated as being more important than the communications of other types. In being mindful of MP and their staffs' time, we used a treatment that was not complex nor time consuming, establishing a relatively low threshold for responsiveness. A more time-consuming and complex circumstance may have more pronounced implications. Overall we did observe high levels of responsiveness, but in the intersection of two key cleavages—class and ethnicity—we found most marked bias, pointing to representative inequalities that still persist in British society. Constituents lack the necessary information to make assessments about whether their MP is working harder for them or for others—they can only observe if a response arrives. And yet in situations with a pressing problem, if a response is delayed, it does the citizen little good. And if other constituents' needs are being prioritized due to their class or ethnicity, then the quality of representation suffers.

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